

# I'd like to teach the world to sing: Music and conflict transformation

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## Abstract

Modern conflict transformation emerged after World War II as a discipline and a field of academic research. Since the early 1990s it has increasingly concerned itself with psycho-social issues (e.g. trauma treatment or reconciliation) in the aftermath of violent protracted social conflicts. Within this psycho-social space there has been a growing interest in the use of music in conflict transformation to improve relationships between in and out-groups. However, the field of music and conflict transformation is still nascent, with little in-depth research available. The majority of studies have been undertaken by interested parties or relies on anecdotal evidence from organisers and musicians with little concern for the context of the music use. Participants, whose attitudes and relationships to out-groups are the focus of conflict transformation interventions, are largely overlooked and their views are rarely discussed. Furthermore, there are few detailed studies on exactly **how** music affects conflict transformation outcomes. Instead allusions are often made to terms such as “the power of music” which act as a black box intended to explain how music “works”, but patently fail to do so.

This thesis attempts to fill these two gaps in the literature by focusing on the participants' experiences in two different conflict transformation contexts, a multi-cultural music project for school children in Norway and the casual music use in a settlement of internally displaced persons in Sudan. Through qualitative research methods, rich descriptive data from different parties is gathered. The data is analysed using grounded theory. As a result a very different and more complex picture emerges that enriches the current understanding of how music is used and perceived in conflict transformation contexts. In particular, how participants view these activities and how power relationships, though rarely mentioned, affect the music use is explored in detail. Some tentative suggestions indicate that music works best when used in longitudinal bottom-up activities and that music can augment conflict transformation activities rather than replace them. Additionally, it is proposed that music may work as a form of benign interruption in conflict transformation activities and that musical events provide a liminal space where the real work lies in the process of bringing any changes in attitudes from the liminal space into everyday life.

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## Preface: How singing stopped war – but not alone

The background to this thesis is encapsulated in the song and history of *Christmas In The Trenches*.<sup>1</sup> This song by John McDermott recounts a particular aspect of the so-called *Christmas Truce* in 1914 when an impromptu ceasefire took place for several days between British, French and German troops, starting on Christmas Eve. The song recounts how British soldiers heard *Stille Nacht* (Silent Night) sung on the German side and how this prompted the ceasefire. The story of the truce and the singing of *Stille Nacht* is relatively well known and sometimes used to describe how powerful music can be.

Inspiring as this notion of a song stopping war is, it presents and perpetuates a particularly romantic view of music. In this view “the power of music” is a black box that works in mysterious and benign ways, regardless of context; in this thesis I will demonstrate how this affects music and conflict transformation. Due to the almost magic nature of music in this view, there is no need to explore further what happens; therefore we never learn how music may actually function in conflict or conflict transformation. This lack of explanation leaves us at the mercy of music and musicians should we ever want to use music in conflict transformation activities. However, if we refuse to accept this and insist on finding out more about what happened, what was the context and how music fitted into this context, a different picture emerges of music and the role of music. Filling in (parts of) this picture is the essence of this thesis.

Using the *Christmas Truce* as an example is instructive. We find that troops on both sides had been promised a quick victory but ended up in muddy trenches and were killed in their thousands every month. By Christmas there was considerable animosity and cynicism about one's own side among soldiers who had fought for some time at the front, and this tended to reduce hostility to the other side. A desire existed on both sides to bury their dead who had been lying in no man's land between the two sides for some time. Furthermore, in both Britain and Germany Christmas was strongly connected to family and peaceful celebrations; therefore considerable emotional priming had already taken place. However, the ceasefire did not **start** when *Silent Night* was sung. In the days before Christmas there had been spontaneous fraternising between the two sides.

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1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s9coPzDx6tA>

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On Christmas Eve, the Germans (who had easier access to material goods from home) had been decorating trees, etc. thus clearly signifying their intent to celebrate Christmas. Later soldiers started singing back and forth and this went on for some time before they started shouting directly to each other. Germans held up placards saying that they would not shoot if the other side did not. **Then** the soldiers came up from the trenches (main source: Weintraub 2001).

The view promoted in the song *Christmas In The Trenches*, no matter how inspiring, do us a disservice by inflating the role of music, which is done largely by ignoring any context, thus making it seem as if music is always the key actor in the drama that unfolds. In this case a number of issues are ignored:

- Music was not used in isolation. It was yet another (very clear) signifier that one side considered celebrating Christmas, with all that this entailed (not shooting being the most important thing in this case) .
- Music did not on its own stop the soldiers from fighting. There were underlying issues that meant the soldiers were already tired of war. So much in fact that new troops had to be brought in many places to “break” the ceasefire.
- The Christmas songs were known by both sides, so it was very clear what they were. In other words, music “worked” because it resonated with both sides.

The history of, and myth around, the ceasefire and my response to it, represents this thesis in a nutshell. Although my purpose is not to belittle music, the reality of what happened shows that music tends to augment actions towards peace but rarely does so out of nothing. Music is action and interaction between human actors and therefore depends on human collusion for any changes to occur. Believing it to be otherwise does not necessarily make it so. In the end, the story about Stille Nacht and the ceasefire tells us more about those who recount it than about music itself. The purpose of this thesis therefore is to go beyond the lay theories and beliefs about music and what it can achieve in war and conflict situations in an attempt to see the real role of music in conflict transformation. Then, perhaps, we can start to use music for conflict transformation rather than hope that music can use us.

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*Arild Bergh, 31<sup>st</sup> January 2010*